



MONTANA'S 58 CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

Impact, Background, and Funding Needs



MONTANA
ASSOCIATION of
CONSERVATION
DISTRICTS

MONTANA'S CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

Working Together for Locally Led, Commonsense Conservation



ABOUT



ABOUT & HISTORY

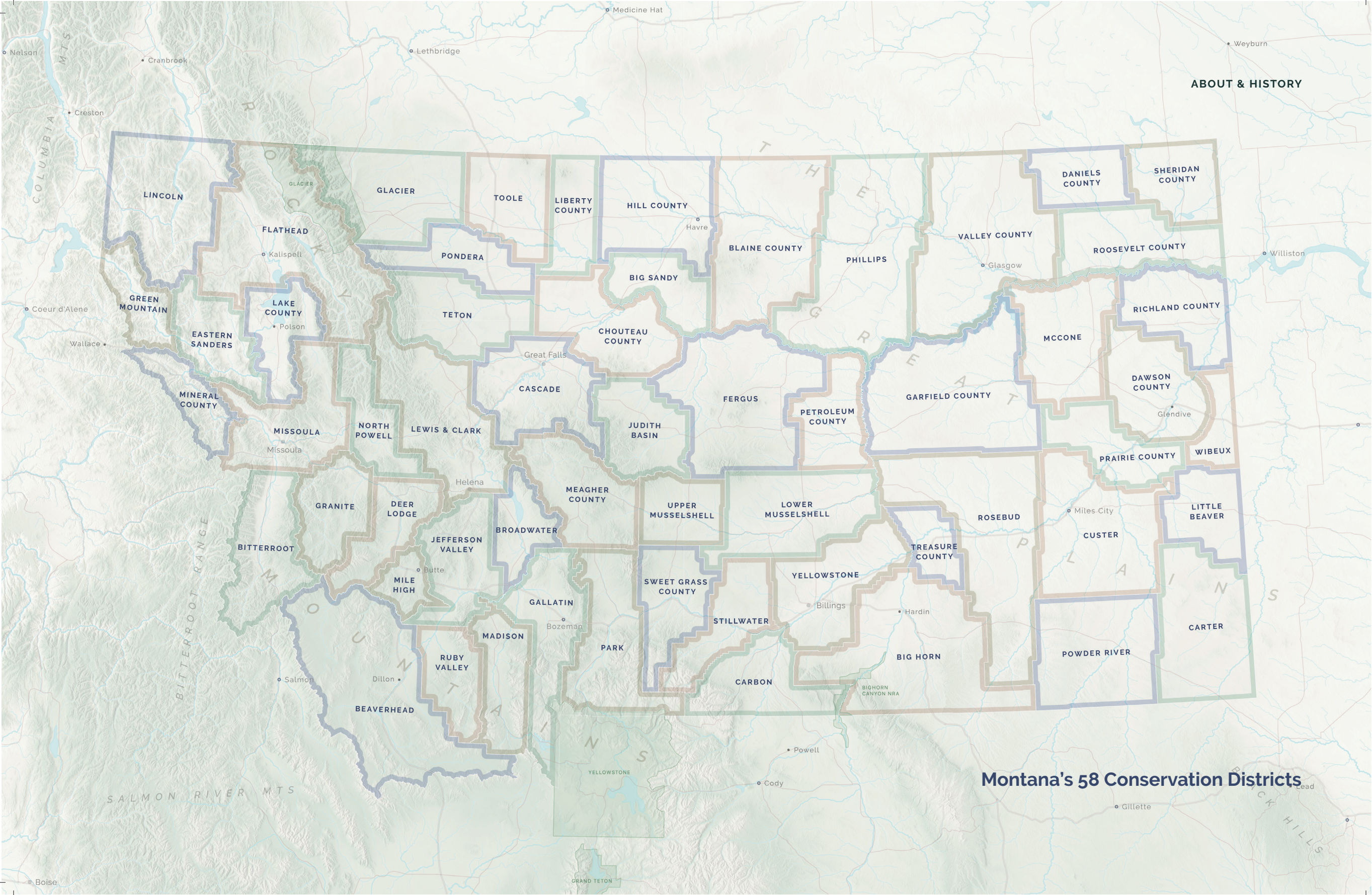
About Conservation Districts

Montana's conservation districts (CDs) are local units of government that work shoulder to shoulder with producers and communities to keep our land and water healthy for the next generation. Led and staffed by locals, conservation districts champion balanced solutions that conserve our soil, streams and rivers, and wildlife habitat.

Our History

The first conservation districts (CDs) were organized in the 1930s as a response to the "Dust Bowl". In 1939 the State of Montana passed legislation creating the state's first conservation districts. Conservation districts are governed by unpaid, publicly elected, nonpartisan local boards that lead local conservation efforts to protect the multiple use of land, water, and other natural resources for future generations. Montana's CDs have some of the broadest authority and responsibilities of any conservation districts in the country, including administering water reservations, passing land ordinances, provide technical and financial support to landowners, and serve on local planning boards.

In addition to many unique programs offered by individual districts, all 58 Montana CDs administer stream (310) permitting in their area. In 1975 the ***Natural Streambed and Land Preservation Act***, otherwise known as the 310 Law (MCA Title 75, Chapter 7, Parts 101-125), gave districts the responsibility to administer permits for work in Montana's streambeds. Many districts are also involved with watershed planning, aquatic invasive species prevention (including running checkpoint stations), fire and flood restoration, pollinator habitat, soil conservation, equipment rentals, landowner workshops, and more.



Montana's 58 Conservation Districts

Programs & Services

Stream Permitting (310 Law)

As mandated by Montana's *Natural Streambed and Land Preservation Act*, conservation districts administer permits for projects that operate in or near streams. This ensures that the project does not damage the watershed or adjoining property.



Soil Conservation

Districts support farmers and ranchers in managing soils in Montana. By implementing voluntary soil conservation practices, we can improve the long-term economic and ecological vitality of agriculture in Montana.



Saline Seep Reclamation

Supervisors from 33 conservation districts comprise the membership of the Montana Salinity Control Association (MSCA). This internationally recognized organization headquartered in Conrad, Montana provides expert technical assistance in the reclamation and control of saline seeps in agricultural areas.



Rangeland Management

Conservation districts provide funding resources, educational opportunities, and technical assistance for landowners looking to make rangeland improvements. If eligible, many local conservation districts offer support for ranch infrastructure improvements, grassland and native species restoration, and riparian fencing.



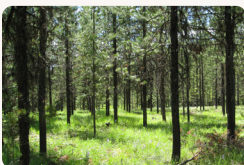
Pollinator Programs

Montana's conservation districts mitigate stresses on pollinators by enhancing the number and diversity of flowering plants in our environment. Pollinators are key to the continued productivity of many agricultural crops as well as the health and beauty of our landscapes.



Forest Fuel Mitigation

Conservation districts provide support and assistance for fuels reduction projects. These projects utilize a variety of methods such as hand thinning, commercial thinning, and planned fires that help prevent future catastrophic fire damage.



Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) Prevention

Across the state, AIS inspection stations are operated by District staff. In conjunction with education and watershed monitoring, these inspection stations protect against the spread of aquatic invasive species and the damage they cause to Montana's natural resources.



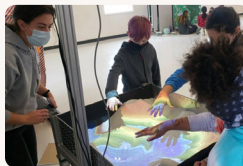
Water Reservations

In 1978, the Board of Natural Resources and Conservation granted water reservations to 14 districts in the Yellowstone River basin, 10 in the upper Missouri River basin in 1992, and 11 in the Missouri River basins in 1994. Today, a total of 36 CDs administer water reservations for their constituents.



Conservation Education & Envirothon

Districts aim to educate and inspire land stewardship across all ages and backgrounds through programming such as the Envirothon, student field trips, landowner workshops, range tours, conservation field days, and more.



ABOUT & HISTORY

Emergency Response: Fire and Flood Restoration

CDs offer fire and flood restoration such as during the 2022 Floods in southern Montana when districts assisted landowners with streambank stabilization, emergency permitting, and more.



Noxious Weed Control

Conservation districts work in many ways to control the ecological, cultural, and economic harm of noxious weeds.



Irrigation Efficiency

Through grants, programs, and technical support, Montana's conservation districts help producers increase the value of irrigated crops while preserving water resources.



This is a non-exhaustive list. Districts also offer a variety of other unique programs such as equipment rentals, youth & adult education, technical assistance, and more.

STORIES

Conservation districts across southern Montana assist local landowners and administer stream permits to protect water resources during flood recovery efforts.

The flooding in southern Montana that occurred in mid-June is an excellent example of how conservation districts have stepped up to the plate to help affected landowners and protect water resources.

The three most impacted districts: Stillwater CD, Carbon CD, and Park CD, have received hundreds of emergency notifications and permit applications. Their workload multiplied exponentially overnight when the floods hit on June 13th, 2022. These conservation districts will continue to rise to the challenge of higher workloads associated with this unprecedented flood event for months and possibly years to come.

In addition to the permitting work conservation districts do, they are also heavily involved in sponsoring recovery efforts. The Stillwater and Carbon CDs are sponsoring the NRCS Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) program. The EWP was created by Congress to respond to emergencies caused by natural disasters. The EWP program helps people reduce imminent hazards to life and property threatened by flooding and other natural disasters. Conservation districts are well positioned to support natural disaster recovery from events like floods given their local presence and experience with stream permitting and watershed restoration.

2022 Flood Event: Assistance & Recovery

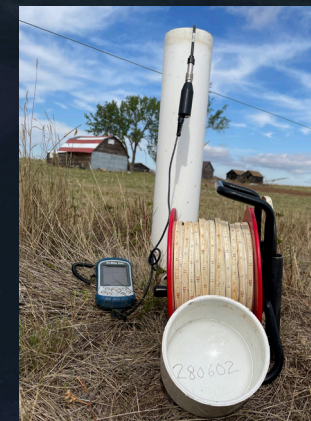


STORIES

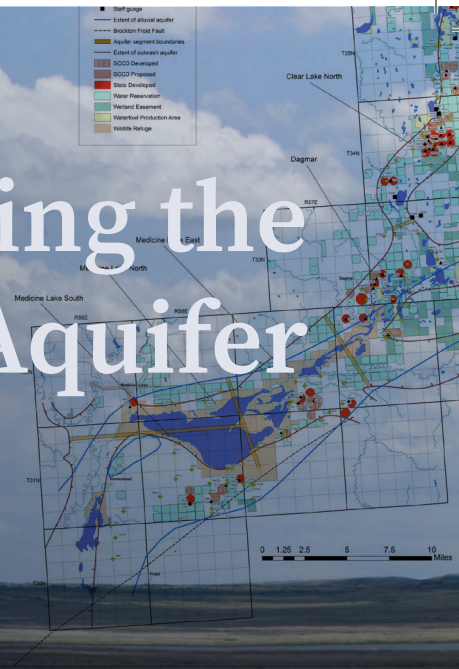
Sheridan County Conservation District provides an essential conservation service in northeast Montana.

In the far northeast corner of the state, Sheridan County Conservation District (SCCD) has a unique program that is essential to the area's water management, especially as droughts across the West continue to worsen. The Clear Lake Aquifer occupies this region and is a significant water resource for the area. Thousands of acres of lakes and wetlands overlay this groundwater, creating important migratory bird and wildlife habitat. Farmers, ranchers, and communities in northeastern Montana also depend on this water.

SCCD was authorized in 1994 by the MT Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) to manage 15,479 acre/feet of the aquifer. Of this, SCCD may allocate the use of up to 10,000 acre/feet through permits for irrigation or stock water. In order to understand the impacts of allocating this water, SCCD has developed an effective water management and monitoring program. Through this program, staff at the District monitor the static water levels of the aquifer once a month, roughly March-November. There are 180 monitoring wells and pivots total throughout the aquifer, 80 of which have data loggers that report data on static water levels each hour. SCCD does some of the data interpretation, however all data is sent to the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology (MBMG) where it is put on their public website. MBMG also further analyzes data and uses it to make appropriate recommendations for future irrigation sites.



Monitoring the Clear Lake Aquifer



Currently, the 10,000 acre/feet permitting allotment is enough to meeting community demands; however, this could change. According to SCCD staff, if drought continues, the number of producers requesting water for irrigation increases, or other competing users come into play, demand may not be fully met. The monitoring program must ensure that water levels are not drawn down too low and that recharge from spring snow melt is sufficient. Continued monitoring of the ground and surface water is needed to decide whether the remaining 5,479-acre/feet can be developed in these scenarios where demand is not met.

The program not only helps ensure the water is not overused, as well as provides data that informs management of wildlife habitat on the US Fish and Wildlife Service Medicine Lake Refuge. Thus, SCCD's monitoring program accomplishes a balance between community need for water resources and conservation of water for wildlife habitat.

By the Numbers

CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

58 MONTANA CDS

There are 58 conservation districts in Montana.

CD BOARD MEMBERS

450+ SUPERVISORS

Elected and municipality appointed supervisors.

2021 STREAM PERMITTING

1,082 PERMITS

Montana CDs processed 1,082 permit applications in 2021. 2022 numbers will be released after the new year.

Note: 2022 permitting numbers will be released in the first half of 2023.

VOLUNTEER TIME

104,135 HOURS

Approximate number of hours donated by CD supervisors each year.

VOLUNTEER TIME

\$ 5,206,750

Value donated annually by CD supervisors (valued at \$50/hr, excluding travel)

Creating Pollinator Habitat

Montana's Conservation Districts are motivated to protect pollinator species of all kinds by increasing the amount of pollinator habitat available via pollinator gardens. To date, Montana CDs have helped over 1,000 landowners plant approximately 56 acres of native pollinator habitat with another 50+ acres planned in the coming years.



Restoring Riverbanks



The Lewis & Clark Conservation District (LCCD) has been working with landowners for over a decade using soft engineering techniques (willow lifts) to stabilize and restore eroded banks on Spokane Creek and Lake Helena. LCCD has also provided technical assistance and labor to other CDs to restore other rivers and tributaries in the state. To date, more than 4,000 feet of bank have been restored.

Improving Soil Health

After polling nearly 250 ranchers and farmers, survey results indicated that producers are motivated to adopt and maintain soil management practices. In response, CDs launched the Soil Health Grazing Management Initiative and the Soil Team within Big Sky Watershed Corps. Both programs will continue into the future and will have widespread impacts across the state.



FUNDING

DISTRICT FUNDING

Big Picture

Despite receiving a relatively small statewide investment, conservation districts serve as hubs of local leadership and trusted partners in the conservation of Montana's natural resources. Montana's conservation districts also function as local stakeholders to state and federal government conservation programs and agencies.

To continue serving their local communities, Montana's 58 conservation districts need a stable, long-term funding source that covers the current budget for district activities and increases the baseline funding for district operations.

CD Funding Sources

Mill Levies

CDs are financed by a mill levy on real property within the boundaries of the district. The mill levied is a floating mill which typically does not significantly fluctuate in total revenue from year to year. More populous CDs have more income from mill levies.

DNRC Grants

The Montana DNRC administers a range of grants for Montana Conservation Districts such as: Administrative (operational) Grants, District Development Grants, project grants, and more.

Other Sources

Some districts pursue additional grants and funding to boost on the ground conservation. Examples include:



Granite CD - Water Smart Grant through The Bureau of Reclamation.



Lake CD - Fuel reduction project with funding through NRCS.



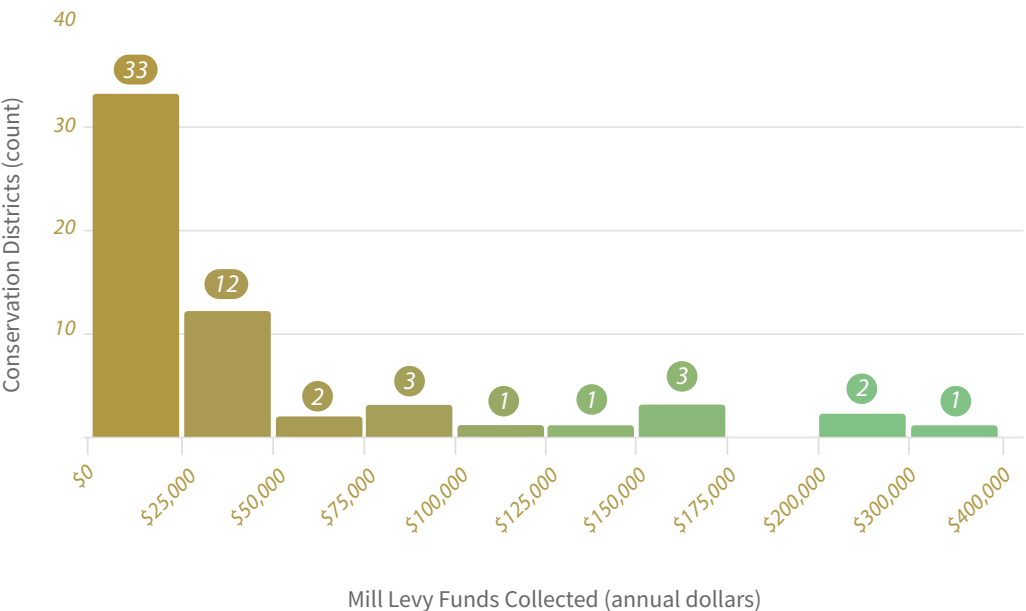
Garfield County CD - Operates Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) inspection stations.

Unsustainable Admin/Operational Grants

Admin (operational) grants through DNRC are a key source of funding for many districts. These grants are funded primarily by the coal severance tax. Unfortunately, in recent years the funding for conservation districts has been short over \$1.5 million dollars.

Disparity in Mill Levy Funds

Depending on the county, a conservation district’s funding from local mill levies ranges from \$2k to \$400k. Only a few districts with densely populated jurisdictions have access to larger amounts of mill levy funds. Most districts with lower populations cannot function without operational funding from DNRC.



Need for additional operational, planning, projects, training, and emergency funding

Time and again, districts have provided on the ground leadership and support in responding to natural disasters, whether it be the 2017 fires in Eastern Montana or the 2022 flooding event in Southwest Montana.

In addition to adequate operational funds, an increase in CD accounts would be beneficial for emergency planning, emergency response, training, and other projects. This funding would significantly increase CD capacity to respond to emergencies and other evolving needs across the state, such as areas with rapidly growing populations and shifting land use.

Staffing Challenges

CD WAGE SURVEY

Median Wage

\$18.65/hr

Comparable state positions are paid \$28.03/hr with a \$0.50 raise after a year. That would be a total of \$77,500 with basic fringe and benefits for one, full time employee at a CD. This figure does not include rent, office space, employee or board travel, other overhead, or equipment.

CD WAGE SURVEY

Staff Attrition Rate

▲ 25%

The annual attrition rate for CD staff has been at least 25% for several years. Preliminary review suggests that this may be even higher in 2022. This high attrition rate is due to low wages, inability for CDs to offer full-time work, and low levels of support for high-responsibility positions.

Funding Needs

Without adequate operational funding, districts have limited capacity to pursue and manage program and project funding. Cost effective conservation is forgone due to simple operational limitations. For conservation districts to continue serving as cost-effective leaders in local conservation, and for CDs to continue administering state programs as directed by state law, they need more support.

CONSEQUENCE OF LOW STATE INVESTMENT

Forgone Conservation

Without adequate operational funding, districts are unable to pursue and manage program and project funding. Cost effective, locally-led conservation is forgone due to simple operational limitations.

SOLUTION

District Funding

We request that the budget for conservation districts include enough funding for every district to have a minimum operational budget of \$80,000 to \$100,000, with adequate funding also available for district projects, emergency response, and increasing statewide demand for district services.

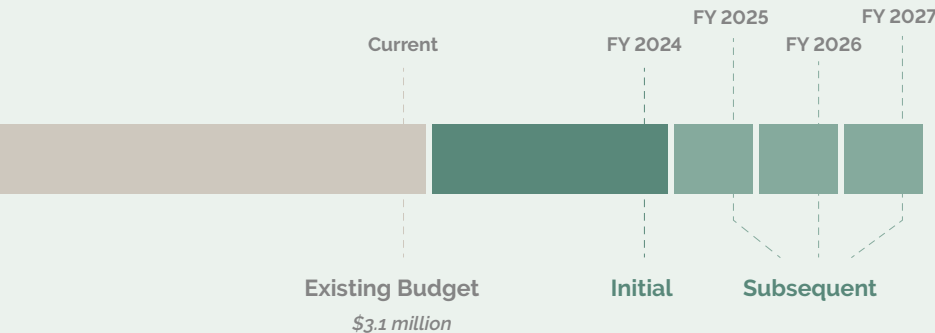
To accomplish this, the allocation and funding available to the CD Account should be increased through a stepwise and fiscally responsible approach that begins in FY 2024 and forms the foundation of a stable and permanent funding solution.

Historically, conservation districts have not asked for very much money and are now **at a breaking point**. Conservation districts are already operating on a deficit, have a high employee attrition rate, and have unstable funding. Land use changes, growing populations, increased development, and more demand for district services and 310 permits are pushing and exceeding the capacity of district staff and supervisors. All while these organizations step up as leaders in natural disaster (flood) response and aquatic invasive species prevention.

Working Towards a Solution

The issue of conservation district funding came to the forefront during the 2021 session, including the passage of HJ27: A Study of Conservation District Funding as well as a temporary funding fix through HB 374. Over the interim session, the Environmental Quality Council (EQC) reviewed, addressed, and agreed upon the need for and urgency of conservation district funding.

A solution for conservation districts during the 2023 session would be a reasonable increase in funding that steps up incrementally over the next 2-4 years.



A solution for districts will need to begin in FY 2024, allowing districts to address longstanding but urgent challenges, leverage increased support, and show how impactful a funding solution for CDs is to Montana’s natural resources and communities. We will return to the legislature in January 2025 to show what was accomplished with additional funds appropriated for conservation districts.

LEARN MORE



To learn more about Montana’s Conservation Districts, visit the MACD website:
[www. macdnet.org](http://www.macdnet.org)



To learn more about the district funding bill. Visit the legislative hub on the MACD website:
[www.macdnet.org/resource-hubs/legislative-re-source-hub](http://www.macdnet.org/resource-hubs/legislative-resource-hub)



To connect with your local conservation district, use the conservation district map.
www.macdnet.org/conservation-district-map

Thank You for Your Time

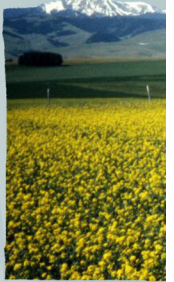


MONTANA'S 58 CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

Impact, Background, and Operational Funding Needs

For over 80 years, Montana's conservation districts have served their local communities. Led and staffed by locals, conservation districts champion balanced solutions that conserve our soil, streams and rivers, and wildlife habitat.

Learn about the history and impact of Montana's conservation districts, and the operational funding needs that they are facing.



Working Together for Locally-Led, Commonsense Conservation



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